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REPORT TO PLANNING COMMITTEE

HOUSING INFORMATION SERVICE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report explores the concept of a housing information service as it evolved in discussions with interested parties in the region, and presents four options for the service. The report describes the study methods and study findings, and discusses the key issues addressed in developing the service.

1.1 SUMMARY

This report identifies the need for a centralized housing information service. Regional Council as part of the Regional Housing Statement directed staff to investigate the concept of the regional housing information service. Most agencies contacted favoured the development of a centralized information office mainly because people now have difficulty in obtaining information on housing. The multiplicity of agencies and organizations directly involved in the development of housing or indirectly involved through referrals to housing further complicates the issue. In addition, low-income households were identified as having particular needs for help looking for and obtaining affordable housing.

Several services and roles have been recommended for the centralized information service. These include:

- information and referral services
- assistance to individuals looking for housing
- research and related activities
- advocacy and mediation
- housing registry services.

Some of the recommended services are now being done by the Region. The Planning Department publishes a "Housing Directory" and Map of the Assisted Housing in Ottawa-Carleton and just recently established a "Housing Registry Office" which runs the Match and Share and Accessible Housing Program. Other agencies provide some of the other suggested services such as the Residential Tenancies Commission. However, several of the services are not provided including a housing registry of affordable units and other services are offered on a fragmented basis only.

Regardless of the services and roles performed, the report recommends four options for the implementation of a registry ranging from a Hotline to provide information and referrals at an estimated cost of $67,900-$77,900 to a full storefront operation including a housing registry at a cost of approximately $140,000.

The recommendation below is this report be circulated to interested groups and individuals so as to solicit feedback on the type of services and options for implementation and that a final report be prepared for consideration for Council early in 1987 in order to give direction for the preparation of the 1988 budget.

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1.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussion it is recommended that:

1. The report on Housing Information Service be circulated to interested parties and individuals,

2. That the Regional Housing Co-ordinator undertake a public participation program in order to solicit input into the recommendations contained in the Housing Information Service report, and

3. That a final report be prepared and brought forward in time so that recommendations on implementation can be incorporated at the time the Planning Department's 1988 budgetary estimates are being prepared.

2.0 BACKGROUND

The need for a central housing information service was initially raised in the 1985 Regional Housing Statement Update. This study found that the public and various agencies are confused by the large and increasing number of housing programs and housing delivery groups. Access to the Region's housing resources would be greatly improved if information about them was more readily available. Accordingly, Council adopted the following motion:

> "That Regional Council explore the concept of establishing a centralized housing information service and in the interim, the Regional Planning Department continue to publish information on regional housing resources and make that information available to the public."

A project planner was hired in August 1985 to study the housing information service as well as the accessible housing registry. The registry was approved in February 1986, and became operational in March 1986. The registry helps physically disabled people find specially designed housing. Although the accessible housing registry is currently operating in conjunction with the Region's Match and Share program, it was anticipated that both services could ultimately be provided through a more comprehensive housing information service.

3.0 STUDY METHODS

At the outset of the study, a newsletter was sent to about 60 groups with a possible interest in the accessible registry or the information service or both. The newsletter described the projects and invited the groups' participation; most groups were subsequently contacted by the project planner at least once. Persons contacted specifically about the information service included about 30 individuals from information services, government housing programs and agencies working with special needs groups or other potential users of the service. These individuals were asked to describe the types of services the information office could provide, and how they could be delivered.

4.0 STUDY FINDINGS

4.1 Need for the Service

Almost all individuals interviewed favoured development of a central information office, mainly because they believed people

now have difficulty obtaining housing information[1]. People do not know who to approach for information or assistance and an initial inquiry easily leads to a round-robin of referrals from one agency or government service to another. A well-publicized, one-stop service would shorten or eliminate this process and reduce frustration and confusion. Low income households were identified as having particular needs for help looking for and obtaining affordable housing. They need information on subsidized housing options, help with application forms, and assistance in looking for and obtaining affordable housing. The interviews also showed some agencies are not fully aware of the housing services available in the region, since some services proposed for the central information service are already available. Thus, there is a further need for a central office, to improve agencies' knowledge and use of available services.

4.2 Services Proposed During Study Process

Consolidation of housing information in one central bureau is the primary service provided by a central office. Within this framework, a variety of information and other services was suggested by people consulted during the study. All suggestions are listed below:

1. Information and referral services. Provide information on:

   - Subsidized and low-end of market housing. Discuss City Living and O.C.R.H.A. programs, private non-profit corporations and cooperatives. Explain application procedures and provide all necessary application forms.

   - Emergency housing.

   - Housing and related programs available to special needs groups such as the psychiatrically-disabled.

   - Rights of landlords, tenants, roomers, and boarders. Roomers and boarders are in particular need of information, since established agencies and government services are more geared towards landlord and tenant issues.

   - Regional housing markets, to help orient newcomers looking for housing. Would include description of municipalities within the region, types of housing available in each and costs.

2. Assistance to individuals looking for housing.

   - Help disabled persons with tasks they cannot do themselves. Read newspaper classified advertisements to visually-impaired persons, make telephone calls for deaf people.

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[1] One agency working with seniors believe it's clientele already has good access to housing information services, while another working with persons needing nursing care said it's clientele did not require information on housing.

- Help individuals complete application forms to City Living, O.C.R.H.A., cooperatives, and non-profit groups. Many people, including those with poor reading skills or difficulties with French and English, need help understanding forms and providing the appropriate information.

3. Research and related activities

- Develop accurate information on market rents in Ottawa-Carleton, to help consumers make informed housing choices. (Further development of this proposal will be dependant on the quality and nature of rent information available through the proposed provincial rent registry.)

- Work with provincial rent registry to develop a data base on the region's stock that is more extensive than that proposed by the Province. Council has made an application under the new Municipal Building Profile Program to develop a more comprehensive rental stock management program with the assistance of Provincial funds.

- Record housing needs of clients, to help planners prepare housing policies and programs. Data on all inquiries will be collected, to help evaluate the information service and assess housing needs.

- Assemble information on government housing policies and housing issues. Pamphlets on housing programs and services could be made available plus copies of municipal and regional housing studies.

4. Advocacy and mediating services

- Mediate disputes between landlords and their tenants or boarders. Further development of this proposal should be delayed until forthcoming changes in the procedures of the Residential Tenancies Commission are implemented.

- Serve as an advocate for people with specific housing problems (ie. follow up their applications for public housing with appropriate authorities) or take a position on housing issues in Ottawa-Carleton. There is a potential conflict in roles if the information service acts as both an advocate and as a provider of information and referrals. This issue is discussed further in Section 5.0.

5. Housing registry services

- Registry of low and moderate rent apartment buildings. People unable to find affordable housing through newpaper advertisements have few other means open to them. Registries are discussed further in Section 5.0.

- Registry of rooming houses and boarding houses, including those suitable for the psychiatrically disabled. The Housing Placement Service at the YM-YWCA now provides this service, but it is concentrated in the Centretown area.

- Registry of homeseekers interested in joining other homeseekers to rent housing. The YM-YWCA's Housing Placement Service will be offering this service as part of the expanded Match and Share Program.

- Maintain a central waiting list for cooperatives and non-profit housing. The Ottawa Federation of Housing Cooperatives, representing 20 of the 32 cooperatives in the region, has considered and rejected the idea of a central waiting list in the past, on the basis it is too bureaucratic, fosters a landlord-tenant relationship, creates false expectations among applicants, and may be misused by administrators attempting to document demand for cooperatives.

4.3 Delivery of Housing Information Services

Most study participants favoured a well-advertised storefront office staffed by qualified personnel and operating outside regular business hours. Some noted that although some agencies have trained volunteers to provide information services, (and coincidentally serve other program objectives), the Region should use only paid professionals with a high degree of knowledge and skills.

A storefront office was favoured because it would increase community awareness of the service, and would permit more personal attention to clients than could be provided by telephone. The storefront also would serve as a central repository for printed materials, and would be accessible to people without telephones. Satelite neighbourhood offices, supported by a central office, were also proposed as a means of identifying and responding to local needs more effectively than would be the case with a single central office. This type of neighbourhood office exists in Dalhousie Ward where a locally based housing information advocacy service was established with Provincial and City assistance in 1986. A telephone hotline service, without a storefront component, was also suggested on the basis that a region-wide service established its presence more effectively through advertising than through a storefront office. Dollars spent maintaining an office would be better spent on advertising and other public awareness strategies.

5.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The issue of duplication of services is central to the discussion of a housing information service. Housing forms a component of established information and referral services such as the Community Information Centre, the Olde Forge Community Resource Centre, and ACCESS Ontario. Housing information is also available through agencies serving specific client groups, such as seniors or low-income households or the physically disabled, or through services such as legal aid clinics that address housing and other areas. A specialized aspect of housing, such as landlord and tenant relations or cooperative housing, may be the primary focus of an agency. With so many agencies already active directly or indirectly in housing, a housing information office cannot help but duplicate available services to some extent. Yet, the multiplicity of housing-related services suggests the need for a single service that can provide people with the information they need or tell them where best to find it. For example, although at least six agencies in Ottawa-Carleton now provide information on landlord-tenant relations, each provides a somewhat unique service, or serves a specific clientele, or both.

Although referrals through the central service would improve people's access to existing services, it is desirable that the central service not be restricted to referrals only. If every caller were simply referred on to other agencies (assuming appropriate agencies existed), the central service would be perpetuating the telephone chase it was intended to forestall. Rather, the central service should provide the basic information sought by inquirers and refer them on to other agencies when more detailed information or specific services (ie. legal advice, rent review, admission to emergency housing) are required. By providing information, the central service will help individuals make better use of other agencies and may relieve other agencies of routine inquiries, freeing resources for other activities.

An advocacy role as suggested by some study participants may be incompatible with the central service's information and referral roles. In order to work effectively with all sectors of the public and agencies involved with housing, the central service should act impartially and be viewed as impartial. However, the central service could refer callers to other agencies with an advocacy role, where appropriate.

Regardless of the role and services adopted by the central service, it will receive calls from people looking for available, affordable housing. Facing waits of a year or more for any form of subsidized housing, low income households are finding few leads through newspaper advertisements or other channels and are turning to various agencies for help. Most of these agencies respond with advice on how to broaden the search for housing and a few sometimes know of vacant units or reasonable places to apply. Generally, though, the agencies believe that a listing of affordable housing in some form of registry is needed. The underlying problem is a lack of affordable housing, and although a registry would not likely increase supply, it could improve people's access to it. Accordingly, an affordable housing registry is included as an option for the central service.

6.0 OPTIONS FOR A HOUSING INFORMATION SERVICE

Options can be developed by combining various modes of service, such as a telephone hotline with or without a storefront office, and various services. The chart below indicates possible options considered here:

Option	Hotline	Storefront	Registry	Network
1	X			
2	X	X		
3	X	X	X	
4	X	X		X

Option 1. Housing Hotline

The Hotline provides information and referrals by telephone only. Callers requesting application forms or other printed materials receive them by mail or are directed to other outlets in the region where they may be collected (ie. to various government offices for specific brochures or application forms). Hours of operation can be adjusted to capture peak demand periods, with telephone answering machines used to take inquiries after hours. The Hotline is not staffed or set up to receive inquiries made in person, and therefore cannot provide person-to-person services such as assistance with application forms nor can it serve as a place where people could browse through various publications. The service is extensively publicized through the mass media, as well as through community newspapers, bulletin boards, agencies in related fields, and other channels.

The Hotline office could be located with the Match and Share Registry and the Accessible Housing Registry, in order to consolidate the RMOC's housing services and take advantage of shared resources. (The existing services now occupy approximately 650 sq. ft on the 10th floor of 222 Queen) The registries' clerk would serve the Hotline's clerical needs, since these are expected to be minimal. The registries' computer could be used for analysing records of inquiries and may be useful for computerizing housing information, if such a system becomes attractive once the service is established.

Annual operational costs of the Hotline option are summarized below:

	$
1 Community liaison officer	30,000 - 35,000
200 ft^2 office at \$22 ft^2	4,400
Advertising	30,000 - 35,000
Telephone	500
Postage	2,000
General office supplies	1,000
	\$67,900 - \$77,900

Option 2. Hotline and Storefront Office

The Hotline would operate from a storefront office, which allows staff to provide person-to-person services such as help with application forms. Although the storefront option is advertised as extensively as the hotline service discussed in Option 1, it attracts a larger clientele simply by being more visible than the hotline service. The office serves as a one-stop outlet for applications and brochures, although clients can also receive materials by mail if they prefer or can collect them at other locations.

The storefront office would include the RMOC's registries, to allow for sharing of resources. Also, integration of the Accessible Housing Registry into a general information office is in keeping with the principle of normalization of services for the disabled. Although there is tremendous variation in office space available at any one time, the housing information service will likely have more choices and a greater likelihood of finding grade-level, retail space if it leases 750 ft^2 to 1,000 ft^2, enough to accommodate the three services.

Factors to consider in the storefront location include:

- highly visible to motorists and pedestrians and located in an area with considerable pedestrian and vehicular traffic;
- free or inexpensive parking for clients and volunteers working for the registries;
- accessible parking, washrooms, and office space;
- situated on major bus routes, so that clients do not need to transfer to reach it;
- situated in or near a geographic neighbourhood where housing problems are particularly severe; and
- situated near other services such as a community services centre or the YM-YWCA that may receive referrals from the information service.

Before the search for space begins, other government and non-government agencies providing housing or housing-related services will be canvassed for interest in sharing space. For

example, this might include a tenant placement officer from the Ottawa-Carleton Housing Authority (O.C.R.H.C.) or City Living or an information officer from the Regional Office of the Ontario Housing Corporation.

Costs of this option are similar to Option 1, except that at least one additional community liaison officer will be required to handle over-the-counter inquiries for the registries and the information service. Costs are summarized

Salaries	Total Cost $	Information Service's Share $
Senior community liaison officer	30,000-35,000	30,000-35,000
Junior community liaison officer	25,000-30,000	8,335-10,000
Office Space		
750 ft^2 - 1,000 ft^2 @ 22 ft	16,500-22,000	5,500- 7,335
Renovation	5,000-10,000	1,667- 3,335
Telephone	2,000- 3,000	1,500- 2,500
Advertising		30,000-35,000
Postage		2,000
General Office		1,000
TOTAL		$80,000-100,170

The incremental costs of this option over the hotline option are roughly $12,000 to $22,500, primarily to pay for the service's share of the junior liaison officer and the increased office costs. The combined budgets of the housing registries will increase by about $20,000 to $30,000, primarily to cover their two-thirds share of the junior liaison officers' salary plus increased office costs. All costs except possible renovation costs will recur annually; renovation costs are included to cover costs of an accessible washroom and interior fittings such as display shelves, counters, and office partitions. Also, advertising costs may decrease in subsequent years.

Option 3. Housing Registry

A housing registry is a direct response to the expressed need for a listing of affordable rental accommodation, intended primarily to help people who cannot find housing through other channels or have difficulty doing so. For example, newspaper advertisements may have little or nothing in a particular price range, or have incomplete information on the properties available. The registry lists only properties priced at average market or below average rents and serves all interested applicants. Although low-income households are the most in need of the registry, its chances of obtaining listings are improved if it is perceived by landlords and the public as a general housing service rather than a social welfare service. Three options are discussed below:

3.1 Outreach Registry of Vacancies

A full-time housing worker approaches apartment landlords individually and askes them to list vacancies with the registry. Much of the worker's time is spent telephoning landlords and property management firms in search of vacancies; properties advertised in the newspaper may also be added to the registry. Vacancies are checked for violations of property standards or health regulations, and over time the housing worker learns which landlords are reliable. The registry advertises for listings and clients on a limited basis, relying more on personal contacts and

referrals at least until the registry is established. People seeking housing contact the information office and are advised of any vacancies in the registry, and also receive advice on other housing options such as Match and Share.

This registry option is similar to the housing registry operated by the RMOC Social Services several years ago. That registry, which had a clientele restricted to welfare recipients, foundered when vacancy rates dropped and landlords were able to lease to a broader tenant group. An Outreach Registry could have similar problems, particularly if its clientele is primarily low income.

Minimum costs of this option are estimated at $30,000 to $40,000, comprising $25,000 - $30,000 salary for the housing worker and $5,000 to $10,000 for advertising and other costs.

3.2 Registry of Rental Properties

A registry of all rental properties with legal rents set at market or below market rates is prepared and distributed to homeseekers so that they may follow up with vacancy inquiries. At a minimum, the registry would list legal rents for apartments of various sizes, the building address and a telephone number. Basic data for the registry may perhaps be obtained from the proposed provincial rent registry which is to provide rents for all rental units in projects larger than six units. Rent registry staff expect they will be asked for a variety of data on a geographic basis but do not yet know whether or how the data will be made available. If provincial rent registry data cannot be used, the required information could perhaps be obtained by a door-to-door survey, although it may be difficult to obtain cooperation.

The rental properties registry would require periodic updating to keep abreast of rent increases or changes in the telephone number for inquiries. The size of the registry could be limited by preparing listings only for selected neighbourhoods of the city, rather than the entire region.

Costs of this option are difficult to estimate. If the province agrees to provide the information, it may charge the RMOC for it. Extra staff likely will be required to access and assemble the information; for example, the province may request a list of building addresses to input individually or may be unable to provide telephone numbers. Also, the Region may wish to check properties for property standards or public health complaints and will likely wait to collect information on rents in projects under six units.

As a first step, the provincial rent registry should be asked whether it can provide the required information. If so, a staff person may be needed to work with registry officals and obtain any supplementary information required. Depending on the amount of work required, the registry could be complete in a four-month to six-month contract, at a cost of about $8,000 to $12,000 for salaries. Ideally, the registry would be updated on an on-going basis or at least every six months, to record changes in rents and telephone numbers.

3.3 Vacancy Registry

This registry provides an advertising service for landlords, publishing information on vacancies on a weekly basis. Again, properties may be screened for property standards and public health violations, before being included in a weekly circular available through public libraries and various agencies.

The City of Toronto operates this type of registry, listing about 100 properties in the summer and 45 to 55 in the winter each week and receiving 20 to 30 calls per day. The registry was stared as a pilot project in 1983 in response to the housing problems of low-income singles, and as a means of creating new units. By providing free advertising plus advice to new landlords, the registry is able to attract a few units each week that have never been leased before. About half the listings are rooms for rent; the registry also receives room and board and shared accommodation listingss. Very few listings are suitable in terms of price or size for low-income families. The registry has two staff and an annual budget of $80,000.

Costs of this option are comparable to those of the first option, in the range of $30,000 to $40,000, including $25,000 to $30,000 for a registry worker. More advertising would be needed to attract landlords, but this could perhaps be obtained through joint advertising with the information service.

3.4 Combination of Registries

A registry borrowing aspects of each of the three options could be used to obtain listings of vacancies for family apartments plus rooms and other accommodation. The registry could advertise extensively for vacancy listings from all landlords, and relay those for rooms, room and board and shared accommodation to Match and Share and the YM-YWCA housing placement service - registries already established for these purposes. The housing registry worker would also work on an outreach basis to find apartments for low-income families, using provincial rent registry information to guide the search for low rental buldihgs. Closer co-ordination of advertising and administration of the established registries and the proposed registry would be and extension of present work by Match and Share and the YM-YWCA on a shared computer system and joint public awareness activities.

Option 4. Network

A network of community-based housing services allied with a central office places housing services closer to the geographic and social communities experiencing housing problems. This service could be provided in conjunction with the existing community service centres. Such a program currently exists in Dalhousie Ward. A community presence may result in greater use of the service by people who would not otherwise be aware of it, or who would be reluctant to contact a centrally-located office.

This option can be explored with RMOC Social Services and the Community Services Centres, with a view to determining:

- Extent of interest in community-based housing services.
- Opportunities for shared use of facilities and personnel.
- Strategies for obtaining senior government funding, through job creation, housing and social services programs.
- Phasing of services.

The costs of this option are not known at this time as they are variable depending upon the reserves available to the community centre and the housing knowledge those resources have.

7.0 DISCUSSION

This report has presented four options for the establishment of a centralized housing information service in Ottawa-Carleton. These options address the need for such a service first identified in the Regional Housing Statement Update. Another option is the maintenance of the status quo where no information service is established but that the Region would continue to provide housing information like the "Ottawa-Carleton Housing Directory" and map of "Socially Assisted Housing" on an as required basis.

Rather than discuss the pros and cons of the options outlined above, this report recommends that the options be circulated to interested parties and agencies for input prior to a final recommendation being made. This is being done for the following reasons:

- Input is required from a diverse group of service agencies as well as potential users to determine the nature and scope of the proposed information service.
- A housing information service has significant budgetary implications (from approx.$70,000-$140,000 depending of the service and option chosen) which cannot be finalized prior to the 1987 budgetary deadline (fall of 1986).
- Details of the proposed rent registry and access to rent rate information has yet to be determined. This information should be available over the next 3-4 months and could have a significant impact of the type of service offered.
- The provincial government has taken over responsibility for almost all housing programs in Ottawa-Carleton and they have expanded their Regional office to handle the additional responsibilities. It may be appropriate for the OHC to either offer this service itself or offer a grant for the operation for this service, this requires further discussion.
- The Dalhousie Community Centre recently established a Housing Help Office as a storefront operation. This operation should be evaluated after an appropriate period of time.
- The Region's combined Match and Share Program and Accessible Housing Registry has only recently (May 1) become operational. Additional time is required to evaluate this program before an expanded effort is contemplated.

It is envisaged that this report, the services identified and options proposed will form the basis for having further discussions with interested groups and individuals. It is proposed that this report be circulated to interested groups and individuals and public meetings be held where required with a view to receiving submissions by 31 December 1986. A final report on the issue will be presented to Planning Committee in February 1987 with a public hearing in April. The report could then be forwarded to Council in May 1987 with sufficient time to give directions for the 1988 budgetary estimates and implementation in 1988.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussion it is recommended that:

1. The report on Housing Information Service be circulated to interested parties and individuals,

2. That the Regional Housing Co-ordinator undertake a public participation program in order to solicit input into the recommendations contained in the Housing Information Service report, and

3. That a final report be prepared and brought forward in time so that recomenations on implementation can be incorporated at the time the Planning Department's 1988 budgetary estimates are being prepared.

J.M. Wright
Planning Commissioner